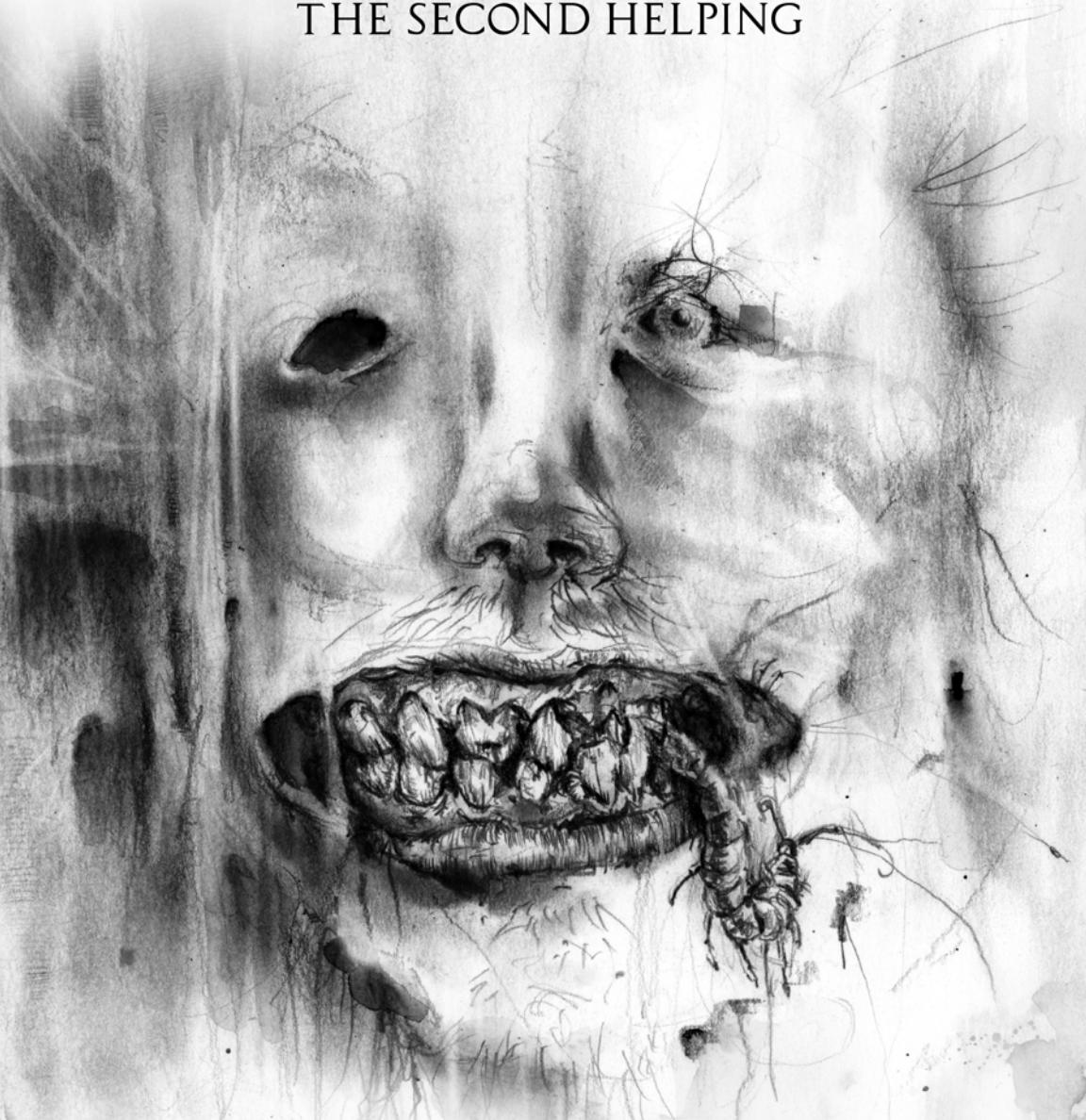


# NIGHTMARE SOUP

## II

### THE SECOND HELPING



WRITTEN BY JAKE TRI

ILLUSTRATED BY ANDY SCIAZKO

# NIGHTMARE SOUP

## II

THE SECOND HELPING

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Written by Jake Tri  
Illustrated by Andy Sciazko

Nightmare Soup 2: The Second Helping

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# NIGHTMARE SOUP

## II

THE SECOND HELPING





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# NIGHTMARE SOUP

## II

THE SECOND HELPING



## THE DANCING CORPSE

“Grab your bike and follow me...” Tim’s eyes were wide and fiery as he stood on Jimmy’s front porch, his breathing heavy and quick as he beckoned his friend to come outside.

Jimmy was standing in the entryway. “What’s going on?” He had seen this look many times before; it usually meant they were going to do something they shouldn’t.

“You just have to see. Come on, hurry, before someone else finds it.”

Jimmy took a deep breath. How many times had he gone on one of these adventures only to end up grounded for two weeks or in some other kind of trouble?

“Are you just going to stand there or what?” Tim asked, “I’m telling you, this is something you *need* to see.”

“Just tell me what it is.”

“No, you won’t believe me. Just come on.”

Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Fine... but I swear, Tim, if we get in trouble this time, you’re taking all the blame. Remember who had to wash Mr. Spencer’s car for two weeks because *you* threw those eggs. Yeah, it was me.”

“This isn’t anything like that!” Tim shot back, his movements and voice filled with impatience.

“Okay, okay, let’s go.”

Jimmy hopped on his bike and followed Tim down the street towards the “The Court,” a cul-de-sac where all the neighborhood kids gathered to play capture the flag, or have water balloon fights. Jimmy could barely keep up as Tim blazed down the street, his legs peddling frantically.

“Hey! Slow down! Jimmy yelled.

“Peddle faster!” Tim responded.

As they reached the end of the street where the pavement opened to a large circle, Tim dumped his bike at the curb and dashed around to the back of Danny Fletcher's house. Jimmy was right behind him. Everyone knew this was the best way to the train tracks, an area Jimmy was specifically told never to go, but parental warnings had never stopped their adventures before, and this time was no different.

The path to the tracks was almost mystical, something straight from the pages of Huckleberry Finn. A sprawling, golden wheat field pushed up against a thick wooded area. Right in between was a slim trail of flattened grass that would lead them to their destination. The last time the two boys had been back here, they stumbled upon an old junkyard, and to a 12-year-old boy, that's nearly the same thing as finding buried treasure.

“You know how we wanted to build a go-cart? Well I came back here earlier to find a steering wheel.” Jimmy grabbed a large stick and started knocking down the brush at the entrance of the woods. “When I was headed back, I took a wrong turn that led to an old bridge by the train tracks. That’s where I found it... under that bridge.”

“Found what?”

“You’ll see... I’m going to warn you though, think of the worst thing you’ve ever seen, and this is worse than that.”

Jimmy stopped in his tracks. “Wait... worse than the *worst* thing I’ve ever seen in my life? Worse than the time Matt Morrison broke his leg and the bone was sticking out of the skin?”

“Way worse.”

“What if I don’t want to see this...*thing*? ”

“It’s not going to hurt you. Quit being a wuss.”

Tim continued to knock down wild brush and tree limbs as they followed the path. They soon came to a split, one way leading to the junkyard, and the other to the train tracks.

“Come on, it’s this way.”

The grassy pathway soon turned to dirt as the woods started to thin. Jimmy’s stomach knotted up—what could be worse than a bone sticking out of someone’s leg?

A large maple tree stood at the end of the path, almost like a guardian protecting something. A large “X” was carved into the trunk. Jimmy didn’t know what that meant, but it made the knot in his stomach tighten even more.

As they passed the maple tree and exited the woods, the dirt path ran right into the train tracks. Jimmy raised his hand to shield his eyes from the baking August sun, and as he looked down the line of rusted steel, he saw an old abandoned bridge about 50 yards away.

The concrete was cracked and covered in faded graffiti. Even out here the bridge couldn’t escape the nocturnal hooligans and their spray paint.

“You ready for this?” A bead of sweat dripped from Tim’s forehead as the same wide-eyed glare returned to his face.

“Let’s just get this over with.”

Jimmy took a couple steps forward, and that’s when the smell stung his nostrils. It was absolutely putrid, so vile and rank that his gag impulse kicked in, forcing him to cough and spit on the ground. It was like road kill mixed with fresh sewage. “What is that smell!”

Tim just covered his nose with his shirt and continued forward.

The area under the bridge was bathed in shadow—it seemed unusually dark for how bright it was outside, almost like the bridge

was trying to hide a secret. But as the boys stepped closer, that secret slowly revealed itself.

A shoe was the first thing Jimmy saw, a black dress shoe, scuffed and faded from the dirt and sun. It was the only thing sticking out of the shadows. As he got closer, his gaze followed the shoe to a pant leg, dress pants, blue... maybe black, he couldn't tell. Jimmy's eyes adjusted to make out a figure hunched over in the darkness, propped up against the wall. He could see a white dress shirt covered in dark, reddish-brown splotches. Was that dried blood? His mind started piecing together the grizzly image before him. It was blood... lots of blood.

There was a tie, it was striped and ugly—a stale yellow and dull blue—which led up to a face... a horrifying, nightmare-inducing face.

The skin was leathery and pale, almost greyish in tint, but with splatters of yellow, and a specific shade of green that only shows up in thick mucus. Rotting flesh gave way to deep red holes and dried crusty boils.

The area around the lips was jagged and torn, revealing a gruesome, permanent smile, and its eyes were half eaten away, set deep into their nearly hollow sockets.

The full image of the corpse finally hit Jimmy, and he immediately fell to his knees and threw up his lunch. “That’s a dead body...”

“Yeah, I know.” Tim still had his shirt up to his nose.

“We need to call the police, or tell our parents, like right now!”

Jimmy stood up and wiped his mouth. Tim was right, this was by far the worst thing he had ever seen.

“We will... we will. But I have to show you something first.”

“What else could you possibly show me! It’s a dead guy just sitting there rotting. There’s blood. He was probably murdered or something.”

“Just watch...”

Tim pulled out his cell phone and started scrolling through it. “I was scared just like you when I first saw this, so I pulled out my phone to take a picture, but my hands were shaking so bad that I dropped it on the ground. Somehow my ringtone went off, and when that happened, I swear, Jimmy, it moved.”

“What do you mean it moved?”

“I mean it *moved!*”

“That’s... that’s impossible.”

Tim pressed a button on his phone and a light-hearted jingle started playing. The two boys immediately looked over to the corpse. Nothing happened.

“See, I told you, now let’s get out of here and go tell the cops.”

Tim moved closer to the corpse, slowly turning up the volume as the jingle continued to play. Suddenly one of the legs started to slightly wiggle. “There it was! Did you see that! It moved!”

Jimmy immediately backed away. “How can that happen. Could he still be alive?”

“Jimmy, look at him. Does it *look* like he could still be alive?

Jimmy again gazed into the cold, dead stare of the corpse. “No, he’s definitely dead.”

The terror gripping both boys soon turned to a frightened curiosity.

“I’m going to try playing something else.” Tim opened his music app and selected a heavy metal song. The guitars and wailing of the lead singer echoed off the concrete walls.

Both legs of the corpse immediately sprang to life, violently jerking and flailing around; its arms soon followed. The boys ran to the other side of the bridge in sheer panic.

Tim turned the music off and the corpse's arms and legs flopped to the ground, lifeless as they should have been.

Jimmy had played this game long enough. "This is insane! We need to get out of here right now!"

"Just one more time. I need to get this on video so people will believe us."

"Fine, then we are going straight to our parents."

Tim nodded in agreement and walked back up to the corpse, he turned the phone's volume up as loud as it could go and selected a hard-hitting rap song with heavy bass. As soon as the music started, the corpse began to "dance" again. It was jerking, vibrating, pulsating, convulsing. Its arms and legs jumped off the ground like it was being electrocuted.

Tim started moving closer and the movements became more violent.

"Tim, that's close enough."

But Tim ignored Jimmy's warning, again stepping closer with his phone held out in front of him.

"Tim! That thing is going to touch you!"

But Tim kept moving, his gruesome curiosity propelling him forward.

Tim put the phone up to the corpse's ear, or what was left of it. At this point the corpse was shaking so violently that its body nearly danced away from the wall. Every inch was now vibrating and pulsing.

Suddenly the stomach of the corpse started to rapidly expand. Tim knelt down to get a better look as Jimmy screamed at him

from the other side of the bridge. “Tim get away from that thing now!”

But it was too late. The stomach erupted like a volcano, spewing thousands of squirming maggots all over Tim’s face and body. More maggots exploded from the corpse’s legs and arms, and finally from the eye sockets.

The maggots writhed and jittered; their bodies pulsed and jerked as the music blared. Tim screamed in horror as they slithered through his hair and under his shirt.

Jimmy ran over to Tim and grabbed his phone, the music wouldn’t turn off, so he threw it against the wall as hard as he could, shattering it to pieces. As soon as the music cut off, the maggots stopped squirming. Tim was still screaming as he ripped his shirt off and shook the excess maggots from his skin.

The boys backed away in disgust, the taste of vomit filling their mouths, as they watched the maggots slowly crawl back into the corpse and continue feeding on its rotting flesh.

## THE TOOTHACHE

“It really hurts, Doc. I’ve had cavities before, but this one is something else.” Gary applied steady pressure to the left side of his mouth with his hand. “Even talking hurts.”

Dr. Stevenson pulled Gary’s medical and dental history from an overstuffed cream folder and flipped through the information. His grey eyebrows were steady and straight, the wrinkled corners of his mouth showing zero signs of emotion. He’d been doing this for such a long time that this was just another run-of-the-mill patient... or so he thought.

“Well, let’s make sure there isn’t an abscess or something in there. You’re probably right, though, just a nasty cavity. Lie back and let’s take a look.”

Gary sat back as the seat automatically reclined. He was a younger guy, early 20s, but he looked a bit older. His mouth was already full of silver and gold fillings because as much as he tried, he just couldn’t put down the soda and junk food.

Dr. Stevenson snapped on his white latex gloves and turned on that annoyingly bright light that hovers just above the patient’s face. Soon, the dental assistants and their rolling chairs wheeled over to Gary’s side, ready to start the exam.

Gary hated this part. They would soon be prodding around his mouth, poking, scraping, and digging with their little metal tools. They would drill his teeth with that gross, crunchy toothpaste, then use that little suction mechanism to slurp up the spit coming out of his mouth. And eventually he would get lectured about how he didn’t floss enough or how he should stop eating junk food.

But first, they had to address this horrific pain. It seemed to originate in one of the back-left molars, and whenever Gary moved

his mouth, it sent a wave of pain radiating through his jaw and upper neck, like a pulsating electric shock.

“Okay Gary, let’s see what’s going on. Say ‘Ah.’” Dr. Stevenson leaned in with his little magnifying tool. Immediately he saw a gaping hole inside Gary’s second to last molar. It looked like the tooth had decayed far into the gum line and went deep down to the root.

“Yep, there she is. That’s a big-time cavity... looks like it’s starting to form an abscess as well. That probably explains the radiating pain and swelling; to be honest we might have to pull the tooth.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s a possibility. Let’s get you over to the x-ray machine, and that will give us a better answer.”

Gary got up and trudged over to the x-ray room like he had several times before. It was the same old song and dance: Put the heavy plastic bib on, bite down on those plastic things, and let the x-ray machine do its work.

After about 15 minutes, Dr. Stevenson walked back in with the x-rays. The stoic, emotionless expression on his face had just a hint of curiosity. You could tell because his eyebrows were ever so slightly turned up.

“Okay Gary, hop back into the exam chair for me.”

“What did the x-ray show?”

“Well... I’m not exactly sure. I need to check inside the cavity, so I’m going to numb the area before I start digging around in there.”

“Wonderful...” Gary rolled his eyes sarcastically.

Again, the dental assistants wheeled over, and Gary reclined back and opened his mouth.

“Okay you’re going to feel a slight pinch… here it comes.” Dr. Stevenson injected the surrounding area with numbing agent and then grabbed a small, needle-like tool to insert into the rotting area of the tooth.

“So, when we checked the x-ray, it looked like there was something lodged inside the cavity.”

“Like what?” Gary mumbled.

“That’s what we’re getting ready to find out.”

Dr. Stevenson carefully stuck the instrument into the rotting hole and slowly moved it around.

Almost immediately, Gary felt a strange vibrating sensation. He then looked down to see something that startled him: Dr. Stevenson’s eyes were as wide as could be, his grey eyebrows pointed up to his forehead, and his nose was wrinkled in disgust.

“I think I’m going to be sick!” One of the assistants immediately stood up and ran away.

“What’s wrong?” Gary asked.

“Umm… I’m not sure how to tell you this Gary, but there’s a—”

“Ouch!” Gary screamed. The vibrating inside the tooth suddenly morphed into a sharp pain, cutting right through the numbing agent.



“Ow...ah... ahhhhh!” Gary began screaming; the pain was like razor blades in his mouth. Something was crawling out of his cavity. He could feel it squirming and writhing as it pulled itself from the rotting hole. Puss and blood started squirting out as Gary felt little legs grasping onto his tongue.

Dr. Stevenson sat back in horror. As Gary continued screaming, a six-inch centipede, soaked in blood, emerged from the cavity where it had been living. It quickly scurried onto Gary’s chin and down the side of his face, it then dropped down to the floor and in the blink of an eye darted into a small crack in the wall.

Gary never ate junk food again after that day.

*Author’s note: Centipedes, millipedes, and other creepy crawlies love dark, moist areas, so it’s no surprise they have been found living in human ear canals, nasal passages, and other body cavities. Some even burrow inside your skin and lay eggs, a fact that is sure to make your skin crawl, quite literally.*

## SKIN SOUP

“Hey... Excuse me. Miss! I’m talking to you,” said a greasy, heavy set man.

Katie rolled her eyes as she walked past the booth, then she took a breath, forced a smile, and turned around. “Yes, what can I do for you this time?”

“I’m sorry, but this chicken noodle soup is just unacceptable. It’s not hot enough, and it tastes like the cheap stuff you buy at the value market. I thought this was supposed to be home-made?”

“It is, Sir.”

“Well can you have the cook try again? Surely he can do better than whatever this is.”

“Sure thing. We’ll get another bowl out to you as soon as possible.”

“Tell them not to use as much salt. My dog wouldn’t even eat this.”

Katie grabbed the bowl and walked back to the kitchen.

“I hate to do this to you, Johnny, but the guy says he wants another bowl of soup. He says this one is too salty, or not hot enough, it doesn’t taste right... something like that.

“What? This will be the third one!” Johnny threw his arms up in the air, frustrated and tired. He was a skinny, middle-aged man with a quick temper. He was also the owner of the struggling diner. “You and I both know there is nothing wrong with that soup. Everyone loves my soup. I swear, some people make it their mission in life to be jerks.”

“I’ve been serving this guy for over an hour. Can you give it one more try? I really need the tip money... even though I doubt this guy is much of a tipper.”

Katie was a college student who needed every dollar she could make. She was pretty, but always looked a little run-down from being overworked, studying too much, and not getting enough sleep.

“Yeah, I’ll give him one more... Guy thinks he can come in here and insult my food. It’s almost closing time; I’m tired and ready to go home. Here you go Mr. Food Critic...” Johnny poured another bowl of broth and noodles, and then added some different spices and some vegetables. It smelled and looked fantastic.

“And one more ingredient...” Johnny peeled a large sliver of dry, dead skin off his nose and dropped it into the soup.

“You’re not seriously going to serve that, right?”

“I certainly am. I’m the boss, and I’m not making another bowl. The guy deserves it. He’s one of those people who thinks servers and cooks are just slaves that can be ordered around.”

Katie looked at the soup for a good ten seconds trying to decide what to do.

“Fine... just because I’m ready to go home.”

Katie walked out to the front of the diner where the man was waiting. He was the only customer left in the place.

“Finally! Took you long enough.”

Katie bit her lip, fighting back the urge to say something in response.

The man grabbed a spoon with his pudgy fingers, holding it like a caveman, and then slurped up some soup in a disgustingly loud fashion. By the way he was devouring it, Katie could tell he was finally satisfied.

“This is absolutely delicious! Well worth the wait. The herbs and spices, they are delightful.”

Soup was spilling from the bowl onto the table as the man lapped it up like a hungry animal.

Once he was finished, he got up, paid with a ridiculously large tip, and left without saying a word. It was one of the oddest customer experiences Katie ever had.

The next night the man returned. He promptly sat in the same booth and waited for Katie to take his order.

“Not this guy again,” she mumbled to herself. “Hey, good to see you again, what can I get you tonight?”

The man tapped his fingers together in anticipation. “I’ll take the chicken noodle soup again, please tell the chef to make it exactly like he did last night.”.

“Alrighty, we’ll get that out to you here in a bit.”

Katie walked backed to the kitchen and leaned up against the wall. “You’ll never guess who’s back. Chicken noodle soup guy.”

Johnny threw his head back in disgust. “Seriously?”

“He says he wants the chicken noodle soup just like you made it last night.”

“Has he been less of a jerk so far?”

“Yeah, not too bad.”

“Okay we will spare him the skin soup this time,” he said, laughing.

Johnny whipped up a batch of chicken noodle soup, minus the dead skin flakes, and served it up. Katie delivered it to the anxious man. In fact, he was sweating with excitement.

“One bowl of chicken noodle soup, here you go, enjoy.”

The man quickly slurped up a spoonful right as Katie placed it on the table.

“Wait... this is wrong. It’s missing something. This is not exactly as it was last night. I want the *exact* same recipe.”

“Um... okay, I’ll tell the kitchen.”

Katie placed the uneaten bowl of soup in front of Johnny, unsure of what to say.

“Seriously! He is sending this back again?”

“He says he wants it *exactly* like it was at the end of the night.”

Frustrated and insulted, Johnny nodded his head slowly. “This guy wants the *exact* same thing, huh? That’s fine. I’ll give him exactly what he wants.”

Johnny scraped some dead skin from his forehead and sprinkled it into the soup like it was table salt. “There you go, serve it up.”

Katie brought the bowl to the man in the booth. He quickly tasted it, looked at Katie with a large, jagged smile, and drank down the soup in a matter of seconds. “Yes! Delicious! Marvelous!”

He then immediately got up, paid with another extremely large tip, and left without saying a word.

The man came back every night for two weeks, and each time he brought along a friend who was just as odd and equally as rude. Soon the diner was packed every evening with these strange customers, all demanding the “special” chicken noodle soup.

Something was seriously off about these people, but business was better than ever, so Johnny gave them exactly what they wanted. Katie knew it was wrong, but the tips were so incredibly good that she just ignored her conscience.

Then one night, Katie walked back into the kitchen and noticed Johnny rubbing some lotion on himself. His arms, face, and neck were raw from peeling off skin. He was using himself like a human cheese grater.

“Johnny, this is insane. Look at what you’re doing to yourself.”



Johnny hung his head for a moment. “I know... this is crazy. But the business was so good... I ... I just couldn’t stop.”

Katie walked towards the door. “I’m going to tell them the soup is no longer available. They can order something else or leave.”

Katie walked out into the crowded diner where all of the strange characters were anxiously waiting.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you all, but we will no longer be serving the chicken noodle soup. I’m very sorry. We’re... umm... out of the special ingredients.”

The customers started yelling and screaming. The original chicken soup man stood up, his eyes fiery and intense. “You don’t understand, we need our soup. We need it now!”

The other customers continued to scream and yell. Johnny could hear everything from the kitchen. His temper started to rise, and a couple seconds later he completely lost it.

He burst through the door and yelled at the top of his lungs. “It was SKIN! My skin! The secret ingredient you loved so much was my gross, dead skin sprinkled into your soup. How do you like that, huh? You come in here every night, rude and demanding, treating my waitress horribly. Yeah, you tip her well, so what! That doesn’t mean you can be complete jerks. No more soup... no more SKIN soup. You can all leave now. Goodbye!”

But all the customers just sat there silently. The chicken soup man stood up again, his stare was cold and unnatural. “Wait... It was your skin that tasted so good? So delectable?”

Johnny looked around in confusion. “Uh, yeah, I guess so. You can all leave now. Sue me, do whatever you like. I’m done with the restaurant business. Please leave.”

The man took a step forward and started to drool. “It made the soup so savory, like a rare spice. It was delicious, magnificent, a

wonderous journey for the taste buds... I must have more, and look everyone... look at all that delicious skin he still has.”

Johnny took a step back. “You’re creeping me out, man. I know what I did was horrible, but the restaurant is closed. There is the door.”

The chicken soup man took another step forward as all the other customers silently stood up. Each one of them salivating and biting their lips.

“But we can’t leave. Oh no. We’re still hungry, and there is so much of that succulent, tasty skin to go around, enough for all of us.”

Katie realized something horrible was about to happen as the diners lumbered toward Johnny like zombies.

Suddenly the chicken soup man rushed forward with a ravenous, gut-wrenching scream. The other customers sprinted right behind him.

Johnny tried to go for the back door but there were just too many of them. Katie stumbled out of the front entrance, screaming so loudly she almost popped her own eardrums. She fell hard on the concrete of the parking lot and looked back to see the diners devouring Johnny, feasting on his skin like a rare delicacy, and smiling like it was the best meal of their lives.

She sprinted down the road looking for help, the sound of Johnny’s horrific screams fresh in her mind, as well as the stench of hot, savory, chicken noodle soup.

## THE HUNTING TROPHY

Carly hated going to her grandparent's house, which was extremely odd for a 12-year-old. It wasn't because she disliked them, or because they treated her badly. She loved them. It was because her grandpa was an avid hunter, and he loved to display his trophies all over the house. Deer, wild boars, birds, badgers, bobcats... If an animal lived in the Midwest, there was a good chance one of its kind was stuffed and displayed at ole Grandpa Pete's house.

There was one "trophy" that Carly particularly hated; it was the head of a large buck. "The biggest deer you could ever imagine," according to Grandpa Pete. It was mounted right above the fireplace in the family room, and impossible to miss.

Something about it just made Carly's skin crawl. It looked angry that its life had been cut short just to become some old man's wall decoration. And then there was that time about 3 years ago when Carly was sleeping over. She got up in the middle of the night for a glass of water, and as she passed the family room, a chill ran up her spine. Goosebumps exploded all over her body and her stomach twisted into a tight knot, it was the exact feeling you get when you know someone, or *something*, is watching you.

She slowly turned her head toward the fire place and looked up... and the deer head moved. At least that's what she swore up and down to her parents and grandparents, who only laughed.

But Carly was convinced she really did see that... *thing*... move, and ever since that night, she hated visiting that house. So she wasn't too happy when her parents told her they were leaving for a weekend trip, and she would be staying with her grandma and grandpa.

"Dad, no! Please! Isn't there anyone else I can stay with?"

Her dad simply folded his arms in disapproval. “Carly, come on now, you know this fear of yours is a bit ridiculous. Yes, I admit those hunting trophies can be a bit creepy, but you haven’t seen your grandparents in months. You’re 12 years old; you can suck it up for a weekend.”

And just like that it was settled.

...

When Carly and her parents walked through the door, the smell of freshly baked brownies flowed through the air like a delicious haze. It was that type of pleasant aroma that only comes from “grandma’s house.” And something even more amazing: All the stuffed, dead animal trophies were gone, nowhere to be found. In fact, the whole house had been re-done.

“Well hello dear!” Carly’s grandma and grandpa rushed to greet them, and swooped Carly up into a big hug.

“You’ve gotten so big, it seems like forever since I saw you last.”

“It’s only been like 4 months, Grandma.”

“Well that *is* forever to a grandparent.”

Carly looked around again, wondering if this was too good to be true. “So where are the...uh... animals.”

Grandpa Pete chuckled to himself. “Well, I built a space for all those critters down in the basement, and that’s where they’ll stay from now on. Your Grandma said it was time, and we knew you didn’t like coming here because of it. So down they went.

Carly gave her grandpa another big hug.

“Well come on in to the kitchen and eat up some of these brownies your grandma made.”

Carly was smiling from ear to ear as her grandpa grabbed her bags and they started walking through the house. But that smile was short lived as they walked passed the family room. Grandpa Pete had moved all the animal trophies except one... the deer head above the fireplace, and it looked angrier than ever.

“Hope you don’t mind I kept ole Gus up there. Your grandma said I could keep one up here, and he’s my pride and joy, so he got to keep his spot above the fireplace.”

Carly’s stomach was queasy at the sight of it, but she forced a smile as best she could.

“It’s... uh... it’s okay Grandpa, I don’t mind it as much as I used to.”

But she did mind it, very much so. She just told herself she would do her best not to go into the family room. It was a big house, and there were plenty of other areas to hang out.

Later that night, Carly was reading a book on the front porch when her grandma called her in. “Carly, come look at this.”

“Be right there, Grandma.”

She found her grandparents sitting in the family room looking at an old photo album. Carly slowly approached, her eyes locked on the deer head above the fireplace.

“Look at your mom back when she was in college. You’re going to be the spitting image of her. I can already see it.”

Carly took her gaze off the deer head and looked down. She really did look like her mom, but that realization was soon replaced by another one. In the photo, her mom was standing in the living room, and right behind her was the deer head. Carly moved closer to get a better look... its face, its eyes, its mouth... they were different.

The hair on the back of Carly’s neck stood up as she backed away.

“What is it, honey?” Her grandma’s eyebrows were raised in concern. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“The deer… its face… it’s different in that picture. How can that be?”

“Oh Carly, not that deer stuff again, I thought you were over that.” Grandpa Pete stood up and walked toward the fireplace.

“You hear that, Gus? Carly is still afraid of you after all these years. Can you believe that?”

Grandpa Pete chuckled to himself and reached up to jokingly pat the side of the deer’s neck. But as he looked toward his wife, he immediately noticed something was wrong. She had the same petrified expression as his granddaughter. The color had run out of her face, her lips were trembling, and her eyes were frozen in absolute horror.

Pete then felt a burst of warm air on his hand, like something was breathing on it. He slowly turned his head, forcing himself to look at what he knew would be an impossible sight. The deer head had moved, it was breathing, and its cold black eyes were staring right at him, shaking with anger. It had been waiting years for ole Pete to get this close.

Its quivering lips peeled back, revealing a set of jagged, misshapen teeth. It then opened its mouth wider than any normal animal could, its jaw cracking and snapping. It let out a sickening scream that shook the room, and then it bit down into Pete’s hand, ripping the flesh from the bone.

Grandpa Pete fell to the floor, screaming in agony as blood gushed all over the carpet. Carly was frozen in terror, completely unable to move. She could only sit there and tremble violently.



The deer head started to shake back and forth, continuing to scream in a horrific, ear-piercing tone that was gut-wrenching and unnatural. Then the bolts and screws that held it in place started to come out of the wall.

“Get my shotgun!” Grandpa Pete yelled. But before Carly or her grandma could react, the deer head screamed once more, so loudly the windows shook. It then ripped itself from the wall and tumbled down, antlers first into Grandpa Pete, goring him through the stomach.

Grandpa Pete was lying motionless on the floor as a pool of blood collected around him. Then the deer head stopped moving, its deep black eyes now dull and lifeless, its rabid expression of anger wiped away. Whatever spirit that had resided there was now gone... and its revenge was finally complete.



## THE OWL MAN

I shouldn't say this, as there's nothing one can do.  
But it comes at night, and it comes for you.  
You can lock the windows, you can lock the door,  
It will still get in, and that's for sure.

They call it "The Owl Man," and it comes from the sky.  
It's not of this world, and has large, black eyes.  
It watches you sleep as it stands by your bed.  
Then it takes you away, to experiment on your head.

You never remember, as it can alter your mind.  
But it comes every night, like a tape on rewind.  
You can run away or move to a new town,  
But it doesn't matter, it will still track you down.

This isn't just a story, many swear it's the truth.  
It comes for all types, starting in their youth.  
It never stops, and there's no way to fight.  
So I shouldn't have told you. Forget it. Sleep tight.

## THE DEATH CLOCK

“Well, looks like I’m going to die in about 70 years from a heart attack. I’ll be 87 then.” Ryan looked up from his phone and smirked.

“Mine says 94 from natural causes. I can live with that.” Kate smiled then looked to her friend Chris. “What does yours say?”

Chris definitely wasn’t smiling. He hesitated for a moment, making sure what he read was correct. “It says I’m going to die tomorrow—that someone named Jack is going to kill me.”

There was an obvious fear in Chris’s eyes as he stared at “The Death Clock,” a popular new app that was making its way around school.

“Oh Chris, it’s just a dumb, novelty phone app. It can’t actually tell the future.”

“I know… I just wasn’t expecting it to say I was going to die *tomorrow*.”

“Like I said, it’s just a stupid app. They make this stuff so people will click on the ads that pop up.”

“I’m not actually worried. It just kind of creeped me out a bit. That’s all.”

“Is that why your skin is all pale?” Ryan nudged Chris’s shoulder, teasing him.

“Whatever man. Seriously, I’m not worried. Like Kate said, it’s just a dumb app.”

But Chris did worry about it. He knew it was completely ridiculous, but as every minute ticked towards the next day, he couldn’t help but feel a palpable sense of dread.

That night he couldn’t sleep at all. He was just lying in bed watching the hands of the clock slowly inch towards 12:00 am.



“What if someone named Jack breaks in and murders me in my sleep?” he thought to himself.

But as midnight finally arrived, five minutes passed, then ten, then twenty... and Chris started to relax a bit. “What am I doing? This is stupid. It’s a cheap phone app.”

He then closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep.

The next morning, as he was driving to school, Chris felt a violent jolt and a loud *thud* coming from the right side of his car. “Did I just hit something?”

He pulled over to the side of the road and put on his hazard lights. A truck soon pulled up behind him and the driver stepped out.

“Hey kid, you need some help?”

A rough looking, middle-aged man with a dirty, ragged baseball cap walked up to Chris’s car. “You hit that pot hole pretty hard back there; I was right behind you. The town really needs to fix that.”

“Yeah I just didn’t see it. I think I may have popped my—” Chris’s voice trailed off as he glanced at the man’s shirt. It was a maintenance uniform with the name tag “Jack” sewn on.

Chris’s stomach dropped and twisted, “I uh... I think I’m fine. I don’t need any help. Thank you.”

“You sure? Looks like you might’ve bent the rim on the passenger side.”

“No, I’m good, thank you anyway.”

“Okay, kid. Well, have a nice day.” The man walked back to his truck, got in and drove on down the road. Chris immediately let out a sigh of relief.

He stepped outside the car and walked around to the passenger side. The tire was torn to shreds. “You’ve got to be kidding me. What a great way to start the morning.”

Chris walked to the back of the car and popped the trunk. He grabbed the tire iron, a couple other tools, and the spare, and then immediately got to work.

As he propped the car up, he noticed a piece of asphalt lodged into the undercarriage. He tried to reach it from the side but his arm just couldn't reach all the way, so he crawled under just a little bit to try and wedge it loose.

Right as he touched the chunk of rock and pavement, a loud *SNAP* erupted next to the shredded tire. Chris looked over his shoulder in horror. It happened so fast he only had time for one final thought before the vehicle completely crushed him...

*“It was the car jack...”*

## SPORE

“Alright everyone, today we have a new student in class. Please welcome Mariana from Brazil.” Mr. Anderson motioned towards the back row, causing everyone to turn in their seats. A shy, timid girl wearing a beanie sat quietly at her desk.

She brushed the jet-black hair away from her eyes and awkwardly raised her hand in acknowledgement. “Hello...”

Even with only one word spoken, her accent was easy to pick up.

“It’s incredibly tough moving to a new place, let alone a new high school in a new country, so let’s make Mariana feel right at home.” Mr. Anderson then went right into the day’s lesson.

“Dude, she’s really cute,” Logan leaned over and whispered to his friend Drew.

“You don’t have to tell me. I have eyes too.”

“Something you want to share with the class, Drew?”

Drew snapped forward and straightened his posture. “No, Mr. Anderson, I’m good.”

“Okay then... As I was saying, zombies are in fact real.”

Drew’s attention immediately went back to the lecture. “What? No they aren’t.”

Mr. Anderson smiled. “Well, maybe not the zombies you think of when you watch *Night of the Living Dead*, but in the insect world, zombies absolutely exist.”

Mr. Anderson pulled out a large glass ant farm from behind his desk.

“Look at this ant; it is infected with a fungus called *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*.”

“Ophicordo what?” asked Drew as he and the other curious students walked up to look.

“The spores from the fungus attach to the ant and start eating through its exoskeleton. The fungus then spreads throughout the ant’s body and even to its brain, where it takes complete control. It then forces the ant to move to a location where the fungus can grow. After that, something really gross happens: A fungus stalk erupts from the ant’s head and releases more spores into the air, thereby continuing the process all over. If you look closely, you can see the stalk I’m talking about. Pretty soon the fungus will spread, creating more zombie ants.”

“Remember the whole ordeal with the bot fly, Mr. Anderson? Why do you keep bringing stuff like this in?”

“Oh, don’t worry, Logan, this can’t infect humans. And I bring it in because I think it’s fascinating.” Mr. Anderson gestured towards the back of the group. “Mariana, did you know this type of fungus is found primarily in Brazil?”

Mariana slowly nodded. “Yes, it made a young girl sick.”

Everyone in the class immediately backed away from the ant farm.

“Now Mariana, I’m pretty sure that’s impossible. This fungus only infects carpenter ants.”

“No, the girl was from my village, I remember.”

Mr. Anderson didn’t quite know how to respond. But before he could say anything, the bell rang and the students quickly grabbed their books and exited.

...

“Hey Mr. Anderson, let’s see what those ants look like now.” A week had passed and Drew was eager to see if the ant farm had transformed into a micro zombie apocalypse.

“You guys really want to see?” Mr. Anderson grinned. The whole class nodded and walked to the front of the room. This type of experiment was exactly why everyone loved his class.

As soon as Mr. Anderson pulled out the ant farm, every corner of the room gasped. The fungus had completely taken over, turning the glass display into a grotesque collection of ant corpses covered in mold-like spores. It was disgusting.

Logan piped up from the side of the room. “You’re sure this stuff is safe, right?”

“Yes Logan, I did my research. It can’t hurt you.”

...

The next day, however, Mr. Anderson found that five students were out sick. Then on Wednesday, that number increased to twelve, and on Thursday, it was twenty.

By Friday, Mariana was the only student in class, and by this time, even Mr. Anderson wasn’t feeling well.

“Mariana... that girl from your village. Are you sure the fungus is what made her ill?”

She raised her head from her desk. “I am sure.”

“How is that possible? It’s only supposed to infect ants.”

Mariana adjusted her beanie and stood up. She walked over to Mr. Anderson and examined his pale, sweating skin. “In Brazil, it has evolved to infect humans.”

“What? How do you know this?”

“The ant farm did not make everyone sick—I did.”

“I...I don’t understand.”

Mariana slowly removed the beanie. As her black hair fell, Mr. Anderson stumbled out of his chair and backed away in terror.



A large, cauliflower-shaped stalk jutted out of Mariana's skull like a grotesque tumor. It glistened under the classroom lights, covered in a dark brown mucus. It throbbed and pulsated as it expanded in size, all the while shooting tiny spores into the air around her.

“The girl from the village was me.” Mariana sat down next to Mr. Anderson as he trembled on the floor, his skin burning as more spores burrowed into his flesh.

“Don’t worry, Mr. Anderson. You and the others will be part of the colony soon.”

## DINNER TIME

“Hey Mom! Wow, that smells great!” Tommy hung his jacket on the coat rack and dropped his backpack to the floor. He walked into the kitchen, but his mom wasn’t there. “Where are you?”

A voice called up from the basement, “I’m down here, honey. Just looking for my old blender. The new one is already broken.”

“What are we having for dinner?”

“It’s a surprise. You’ll really love it. Why don’t you take your backpack up to your room and play video games or something until it’s ready?”

Tommy wasn’t going to argue with that. Usually the first thing his mom told him to do was take out the trash, fold the laundry, or worst of all—dust the furniture.

As Tommy sat upstairs and played his game, a loud crash and muffled scream came from downstairs. He dropped the controller and rushed to the top of the stairs.

“Mom? Are you okay?”

She immediately called back from the kitchen, “I’m fine, sorry, just dropped some pots and pans on my foot. I’m okay.”

Tommy stepped down a couple steps. “Do you want me to come help you?”

“*No, don’t come down here!*” his mom screamed, her shrill tone startled Tommy.

“Geeze, Mom. Fine, I’ll stay up here.”

Twenty minutes later, Tommy heard another scream. This time it sounded like a man. Again, Tommy ran to the stairs. “Mom?”

“*Stay upstairs!*”

“Why do you keep yelling at me!”

A much cooler voice responded, “I’m sorry, honey. I just really want this to be a surprise. I’ve been working on it all day.”

Tommy walked to his room, but then stopped, something odd was going on.

He tiptoed back to the top of the stairs, trying to listen in on the kitchen. *Chop... Chop... Chop.* The sound of a large cleaver hitting the cutting board rang out.

Tommy slowly crept down a couple stairs. Regardless of the strange situation, whatever was cooking smelled absolutely delicious.

He descended five more stairs, quiet as a mouse. *Chop... Chop... Chop,* the cleaver continued.

As Tommy reached the bottom of the stairs, he pressed against the wall and slid toward the kitchen so he wouldn't be seen. Once he got to the edge of the wall, he peeked his head around just enough to see what was going on.

*Chop... Chop... Chop.*

The floral pattern of his mom's favorite cooking blouse was immediately recognizable. He could see the back of her as she violently slammed the cleaver into a flesh-colored mass, causing spurts of red to squirt out.

*Chop... Chop... Chop.*

Tommy looked down to the kitchen floor and saw another shirt he recognized. It was his dad's—and it was covered in blood.

Suddenly, Tommy's cell phone vibrated in his pocket. He quickly grabbed it before it made too much noise. He had a new text message:



Hey Tommy, it's mom. Working late tonight, won't be home for another hour. Just have your dad order you guys a pizza or something. Love you.

Tommy's gut twisted and turned, as he nearly dropped the phone.

The figure wearing the blouse turned its head ever so slightly, its face still mostly out of view. Tommy couldn't tell if it was a man or woman, but the corner of its mouth stretched into a wide, unnatural smile that was physically cut into its cheekbones. Long, greasy hair clung to the side of its face, held there by sweat and spatters of blood.

"I told you to stay upstairs, young man. You didn't listen. *Now you're in trouble.*"

## BAD SKIN

“I’m not going to Amy’s pool party.” Jerry folded his arms and stared at the ground. He obviously didn’t like talking about the subject.

“Why not, man? Everyone is gonna be there, including Mandy, and I know for a fact you have a crush on her.” Bill was dumbfounded as to why his best friend would want to skip out on the biggest social event of the summer. “Come on, man. I just got my license—I can drive us there. I can’t go if you don’t go.”

Jerry ran his hands through his auburn hair and sighed. “I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to help Mom with something that day.”

Bill rolled his eyes. “Oh, yeah? What does she need help with?”

“I don’t know… stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah… stuff.”

Bill sat down on the porch steps of Jerry’s house. He brushed the long, shaggy hair from his eyes and took a drink of soda. “Look, man, I’m your best friend. There’s obviously a reason you don’t want to go to this party. Why won’t you just tell me what it is.”

Jerry sat down next to him. “It’s embarrassing.”

“Just tell me, dude. I won’t give you a hard time about it.”

Jerry sighed. “It’s my skin; I have horrible bacne.”

“Bacne?”

“Yeah, really bad acne, but instead of on my face, it’s on my back.”

“So what? I get zits on my shoulders and stuff all the time.”

“You don’t understand, Bill. This is really, really bad. I’m super self-conscious about it. As soon as one pimple goes away,

another massive one pops up in its place. And they hurt; I can feel them. I can't even look at my back in the mirror anymore because it makes me feel bad."

"Look, man, I had that same problem."

"You did?"

"Yep, got set up with a really good dermatologist and he cleared me right up. All I had to do was use this special cream and watch my diet a bit. You know, stay away from sugary drinks and greasy stuff." Bill looked at the soda in his hand, shrugged, and then took another sip.

"How fast did it work?"

"Couple weeks. If you get an appointment this week, I bet your skin will look a lot better come party time."

"Thanks a lot, man. I'll have my mom give them a call."

"No problem."

Bill finished the last of his soda, then stood up and brushed his jeans off. Suddenly a high-pitched shriek echoed through the woods surrounding Jerry's house. It sounded like a large bird. Bill just shook his head. "These woods have always creeped me out, I don't know how you live back here."

Jerry laughed, "I guess I'm just used to it."

Bill crunched up his soda can and tossed it in the trash by the driveway. "Alright, I gotta get home and cut the grass or my dad is gonna kill me. Make sure you get to the dermatologist. Dr. Skinner is his name; seriously, a dermatologist named Dr. Skinner, it's impossible to forget." Bill chuckled to himself as he got in his car. "We're going to that party!"

Jerry waved as Bill took off down the road. His thoughts immediately turned to his skin problem. Hopefully this "Dr. Skinner" could help him.

...

A friendly looking, silver-haired man in his late 50s opened the door and walked into the exam room. “Hi, Jerry, I’m Dr. Skinner. Nice to meet you.” He shook Jerry’s hand. “So what can we do for ya?”

Jerry again folded his arms and looked down. He was self-conscious even at the doctor’s office. “Well, I’m having a real problem with acne on my back. It’s so bad I can’t even look at it, and I almost never take off my shirt. I can feel new pimples pop up every day, and they actually hurt a lot of the time.”

“I see. You’re right at the age where this can be a tough problem. A lot of the time it’s just hormone-related and will calm down once you get a bit older.”

Dr. Skinner jotted down a few notes and took a seat next to the exam chair. “What about your diet? Do you eat a lot of greasy foods, or drink a lot of soda?

“Not really.”

“Are you on any medications right now?”

“Nope. Just a multivitamin every day.”

“Hmm, well, let’s take a quick look and see what we’re dealing with. Go ahead and take off your shirt for me.”

Jerry took a deep breath and hesitated for a moment. Then he slowly lifted his shirt over his head.

“Okay, turn around.”



Jerry took another deep breath and turned his back to Dr. Skinner.

His notepad and pen immediately dropped to the floor. “*Oh my... how did you not know?*”

Jerry could hear the trembling in Dr. Skinner’s voice. “What is it? What’s wrong!”

Jerry spun around to see the shock engraved into Dr. Skinner’s eyes. His friendly smile had twisted into an upturned lip of disgust. He tried to be professional and hide his revolt, but Jerry could still see it all over his face.

“Son, you don’t have acne, and those aren’t pimples on your back... *they’re ticks... hundreds of ticks.*”

## THE WATCHER

I am The Watcher. The shadows are my home.  
I emerge at night. The dark is where I roam.

I creep up to your house and I scratch at your door.  
I'm the sound in your basement, the creak of your floor.

I watch from your window, while you sleep in your bed.  
I'm the phantom that stalks you, filling you with dread.

When you walk alone, I follow with glee.  
There's nowhere to hide. There's nowhere to flee.

One day I'll strike, and the game will be done.  
But for now, I just watch... It's so much more fun.

I'm watching you now. Go ahead, take a look.  
You'll never see me... so just keep reading that book.



## THE HITCHHIKER

Amanda was a crazed serial killer. There was really no other way to put it. She was slashing her way across America, hitching rides with truck drivers and then hacking them to pieces once she reached her destination.

She was a pretty girl, early twenties, blonde with striking blue eyes. This always made getting the next ride easy. Plus, she was 5'3" and 110 pounds; who would have ever suspected her?

She found herself drifting around central Indiana. The early August air was making her skin sticky and wet. The west coast wasn't supposed to be so humid—maybe she'd head that way.

When she was finally ready to leave, she simply walked out to the highway and stuck her thumb into the air. After about ten minutes, she saw a dark red semi-truck with a large eagle painted on the side. Despite the time of night, she didn't have to wait long.

"Hey there! You need a ride?" said an older woman in her early 60s. She had leathery, coarse skin and a kind, warm smile. Amanda was taken a bit off guard.

"Um, yeah. I do. I'm headed west."

"Perfect! I'm headed to Sacramento. Could always use someone to talk to."

Amanda hesitated—maybe she could give this nice woman a pass and just accept the ride without making her the next victim. "Okay, Sacramento it is."

Amanda climbed into the passenger side and put her seat belt on.

"I'm Charlotte."

"I'm Amanda. Nice to meet you."

"So where you from, Amanda?" The woman took a long sip of coffee. It was the largest cup Amanda had ever seen.



“Uh, all over the place, I guess. I was born in Tennessee but I moved a lot as a kid.”

“Tennessee, huh? Nashville. I love that city. With all those lights and music, it’s like Midwest Las Vegas. You like country music?”

“Yeah, it’s okay I guess.”

“Good.” Charlotte turned on the radio and switched it to her favorite country station. “So, what’s waitin’ for you out west? Boyfriend? Husband?”

“To be honest? I’m just looking for a change and thought California sounded like a nice place.”

Amanda had to quietly adjust the knife in her pocket. The handle was starting to dig into her hip.

“Yeah, I hear ya. Sometimes you just need something different. That’s why I like being on the road. The scenery is always changing.”

Charlotte continued to talk as Amanda stared out the window. *“This woman never shuts up,”* she thought to herself. *“Maybe I won’t give her a pass after all. This nonstop talking is going to drive me insane... well... even more insane than I already am.”*

After three hours of driving, Charlotte was still chatting up a storm, and Amanda couldn’t take it anymore.

“Hey, can you stop at the next rest station? I really need to use the bathroom.”

“Sure thing, hon. Probably a good idea for me as well.”

Amanda didn’t really have to use the bathroom. She had just decided this would be Charlotte’s “last stop,” so to speak.

As they pulled into the rest area, the parking lot was completely empty. Nobody else was there.

“*Perfect,*” Amanda thought.

She slowly wrapped her fingers around the knife's handle, but suddenly the music on the radio cut off and was replaced by some type of public announcement.

"Attention: Illinois state police have reason to believe a wanted killer is traveling on I-70 West. The person of interest was last seen near Plainfield, Indiana and—"

Static cut the station off as Amanda sat tensely in her seat, fingers still gripping the knife in her pocket. Her heart began to race. *"How did they find out? How could they have known! I was always so careful never to leave evidence!"* Her eyes were wide and her lips started to quiver.

"Is something wrong, Amanda?" Charlotte had noticed her panic-stricken demeanor,

"Uh, no it's just, um... Did you hear the radio? People are crazy these days. Just scary to think that person is so close to us."

"You're tellin' me. But after being on the road for 20 years, I've just about seen it all."

Charlotte popped her door open, climbed down from the driver's seat, and headed into the bathroom.

As soon as she was out of sight, Amanda frantically turned the dial on the radio, searching for a better signal to hear if there were more details. *"How much information do they have? Do they know what I look like?"*

After about five minutes, she finally found a clear signal that was repeating the announcement.

"Attention: Illinois state police have reason to believe a wanted killer is traveling on I-70 West. The person of interest was last seen near Plainfield, Indiana and is considered armed and extremely dangerous. The suspect is female, early 60s, driving a dark red semi with an eagle on the side."

"What?"

Amanda then jolted forward violently as a sharp object plunged into her back again and again. Her mind was so shocked the pain didn't even register, then she briefly turned her head to look in the passenger mirror. Charlotte was standing just outside the window holding a large, blood-soaked knife.

“Sorry, hon, looks like this is your last stop.”

## DUMB DOG

“Hey Jake, can you do me a *huge* favor and watch Lucy over the weekend?”

“Jake briefly lowered the phone, rolled his eyes, and sighed. “Seriously, Brianna, the entire weekend?”

“We can’t find anyone else. Mom and Dad are out of town, and the last time we took her to that doggy boarding place she got sick, so I’m not doing that again. Please?”

“Ugh... fine. But you owe me.”

“Oh thank you! You’re really saving us.”

“You know you treat that dog like a human child, right?”

“Well, she’s my fur-baby, which makes you her fur-uncle.”

“The sad part is you’re being serious.”

“You know you love her. How can you not? She’s so cute.”

“Okay, well, just bring her over. I’ll see you in a bit.”

Jake hung up the phone and plopped back on his bed. His carefree weekend just got filled with dog walks and poop scooping. Lucy was a good dog, and fun to play with, but she was a handful and needed attention twenty-four-seven. She also had to be at your side for every waking moment. It *really* was like taking care of a human kid.

About twenty minutes later, Jake’s sister Brianna arrived at his house. The little white puffball known as Lucy immediately sprinted in, excited to see her “fur-uncle.”

“Well hey there, Lucy. Looks like it’s me and you for the weekend.”

“Thank so much for doing this. I know she can sometimes be a pain. Just remember to take her out every three or four hours and she’ll be fine”



Brianna set a large cloth tote bag onto the table. “Here’s her toys, food, jacket, all that stuff.”

“Her jacket?”

“Yeah, it’s cold outside, so she has a little doggy jacket. Isn’t that cute?”

“You’ve passed the point of insanity.”

“Oh, be quiet, lots of people buy clothes for their dogs.”

“Whatever you say, Sis.”

“Okay, hate to run, but Kyle and I have to hit the road. We have to be in Cincinnati by 7 pm.”

Brianna walked over to Lucy and picked her up, letting the little white dog lick all over her face. “Bye Lucy! We’ll see you in a couple days. I love you. See you on Sunday, Jake. Thanks again.”

“See ya, drive careful.”

“We will.”

As Brianna went out the front door, Jake just looked down at Lucy, who was smiling and wagging her tail.

“I guess you’re not so bad.”

...

Later that night, Jake was sitting on the couch watching TV when suddenly Lucy jumped from his lap and started barking. She rushed over to the large sliding glass door facing the backyard and growled at the darkness.

Jake stood up and peered out into the yard, wondering if Lucy had seen something, but the only movement he saw was from the trees swaying in the cold November wind.

“There’s nothing out there, Lucy, chill out.”

About an hour later, Jake was comfortably wrapped in a warm blanket. Just as he was about to doze off, his eyes ripped open to the sound of high-pitched yapping.

“Lucy! Stop!”

Again, Jake stood up and looked out into the backyard.

“There’s still nothing there. Stop barking and lie down.

Seriously, you’re being annoying.”

Jake grabbed a treat from the tote bag. “Here, eat this and be quiet.”

It hadn’t even been 10 minutes when, again, Lucy went off like a fire alarm.

*Yap! Yap! Yap!*

“That’s it!” Jake picked Lucy up and walked outside. The brisk air felt like tiny needles on his skin.

“Look, you dumb dog, there is nothing out here.”

Lucy peered ahead towards the darkest corner of the yard where the tree line began and started to growl.

“Oh how ferocious the little puff ball is. I’m sure the raccoons out there are absolutely terrified.”

When Jake walked back in the house, he brought Lucy into the bedroom. “We’re going to sleep now. No more freaking out okay?”

Jake shut the door and turned off the lights. When he got under the covers, Lucy immediately moved to the edge of the mattress and starting growling at the bedroom entrance.

“Now you don’t like doors, either? Please go to sleep, Lucy.”

After a couple more minutes of growling, Lucy finally calmed down and curled up by Jake’s feet.

The next day, Lucy was happy and playful, but as soon as the sun went down, she started growling and barking at the glass door again.

“Not this again! Lucy, for the last time, there is nothing out there. Are you seeing your reflection in the glass or something?”

Jake picked her up, walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

“Here, I know you like peanut butter. This should shut you up for a while.”

Jake spread a light coat of peanut butter all over a paper plate so Lucy couldn’t just lick it up all at once. Hopefully she’d forget about whatever she was barking at.

Jake walked back to the family room and sat down.

“Finally, some quiet.”

But as soon as he spoke those words, a shrill, high-pitched bark pierced the silence.

“*Yap! Yap! Yap!*”

“That is it! I’ve had it! I’m putting you in your cage, and leaving you in the bedroom until you shut up.”

Jake walked over and grabbed Lucy as her barking and growling intensified. He glanced up at the glass door and paused. The hair on the back of his neck stood up and goosebumps erupted over his body.

There *was* something out there.

Jake moved closer to try and peer through the darkness. It was a tall, skinny figure, emaciated and skeleton-like. It resembled a man, but its arms and legs were unnaturally long and gangly. It just stood there—watching him.

What was even more unbelievable was it seemed to be floating in the air, and was nearly transparent. But then Jake’s stomach dropped as he made a horrifying realization: He was looking at a reflection in the glass, which meant it was already in the house, standing behind him.

## TASTY CHICKEN

“Wow, this looks absolutely amazing!”

It was the largest feast Maggie had ever seen, and it had all her favorite foods. Macaroni and cheese, baked beans, corn on the cobb—and best of all, her grandma’s famous fried chicken.

She couldn’t exactly remember what the occasion was, but everyone in her family was there. Maybe it was someone’s birthday, or an anniversary. She didn’t know. In fact, Maggie couldn’t even remember how she got there. Did she come with her parents? Maybe her sister? She had no idea, and the weird thing was she didn’t care. She’d worry about that after she ate all this delicious food.

Maggie picked up her fork and took a bite of the macaroni and cheese. Her taste buds exploded. It was creamy and warm, the best mac and cheese she’d ever had.

But then her mom immediately walked over and snatched the utensil from her hand. “Maggie, wake up!”

Maggie’s eyes snapped open. It took her a few seconds to adjust to the darkness, but she soon realized she was in the kitchen with her mom standing over her.

“You’ve got to stop doing this. It’s the second time this week.”

Maggie tilted her head, confused, then the realization hit her: She had been sleepwalking.

She looked down to see leftover mac and cheese from the week before spilled all over the kitchen floor. It was spoiled and moldy.

“Why do you always go for the refrigerator?”

“I...uh... I’m not sure.”



Maggie was still groggy and hadn't fully snapped out of her trance.

"We've got to get you to a sleep specialist so they can figure out how to stop this. I'm afraid you're going to hurt yourself one of these nights."

Maggie finally started to come out of her haze.

"I'm sorry Mom. It only happens when I have that dream I keep telling you about."

"The one with the family dinner?"

"Yeah, and every single time I end up right here."

Maggie's mom yawned and rubbed her eyes. "Okay, well I'm going to call Dr. Steinberg in the morning and get you scheduled for a sleep study later this week. Until then, I'm putting a lock on the fridge."

...

The next night, Maggie was lying in bed fighting her heavy eyelids. The fact that she just got up and walked around while sleeping terrified her. What if she fell down the stairs? What if she walked outside in the cold? She fought for as long as she could, but eventually her eyelids won the struggle and she dozed off.

Maggie was instantly transported back to the dining room. As usual, her favorite foods were sprawled out in front of her.

She grabbed a piece of fried chicken this time, a nice fat drumstick. It was seasoned to perfection; the aroma alone was enough to make her salivate.

Maggie brought the chicken leg to her lips, but when she tried to take a bite, an excruciating pain radiated through her right arm.

"Ow!"

"What's wrong? Don't you like my fried chicken?"

Maggie looked over to see her grandma standing next to the table. “It’s not that, Grandma, it’s just that my arm hurts.”

“Nonsense! You don’t like it!”

Maggie tried again to sink her teeth into the chicken leg, but the pain shot through her arm like a lightning bolt. “Ahhh, it really hurts!”

“I can’t believe you, young lady. I spent all afternoon making that chicken and now you won’t even eat it.”

The rest of the family turned around and stared at Maggie. Her dad suddenly appeared in the corner of the room and started yelling at her.

“Maggie, you’re being disrespectful!”

“Dad, something is wrong with my arm!”

“Excuses... typical from a teenage girl.”

Tears started to well up in Maggie’s eyes as she looked back to her grandma.

“Just take one bite, Maggie. It will really make me happy.”

Maggie again picked up the chicken leg. She took a deep breath and then bit down as hard as she could. The pain was like a knife ripping into her flesh. She tore a big chunk of meat off, chewed it a few times, and then swallowed. Other than the excruciating pain, it really was delicious.

“*Maggie! Wake up right now!*”

Suddenly the dining room went pitch black and everyone disappeared. Maggie blinked a few times letting her eyes adjust, then she realized she was back in the kitchen.

She looked up to see a huge padlock on the refrigerator, then she turned to see her mom. She didn’t look tired this time. Instead, she looked horrified. Her eyes were wide and teary, and her hand was pressed to her trembling lips.

“*What have you done to yourself...*”

The distinct metallic taste of blood filled Maggie's mouth, then a sickening jolt of pain forced her to look down at her right arm.

Maggie started screaming hysterically.

She had eaten the flesh of her forearm down to the bone.



## FISHING BUDDIES

“It sure is a perfect day for some fishing.”

Stan looked over at his friend Bob and nodded, then pushed a hook through a large, juicy worm. “It sure is.”

Stan and Bob were both older gentlemen who had been best friends since high school. On the first Sunday of every month, it was tradition that they would pack a lunch, grab their tackleboxes, and head out to the lake. Bob had an old boat they always used. It wasn’t anything fancy, but it was reliable, and that’s all that mattered.

On this particular Sunday, the weather was crisp and cool. Fall was just beginning, so the lake looked especially scenic as the trees showed different shades of red, orange, and yellow. The atmosphere was about as relaxing as it could possibly be.

Stan and Bob never said much on these fishing trips. They just enjoyed the silence together. The sound most often heard was a bird chirping on a nearby tree branch, or the winding and clicking of a fishing rod.

As they floated along near the north side of the lake, Bob was reeling in his line when suddenly the end of his pole plunged down and bent sharply. “Got me a bite!” He jerked the pole up and started cranking the reel. “Oh, she’s a big one.”

Stan smiled as he looked on from the other side of the boat. “Well, don’t let her get away!”

Bob continued to reel the line in, but started to struggle a bit. “I’m tellin’ ya, Stan, this might be the biggest one I’ve ever hooked!”

“You sure you didn’t just snag a log down there?”

“No way. It’s coming up, just slowly.”

Stan edged his way over to get a better look. He grabbed the net, ready to help haul the fish in. “Look! I think I see something.” A large object started to emerge just below the surface. “Bob—that doesn’t look like any fish I’ve ever seen.”

“Well what is it?”

“Not sure, keep bringing it up.”

Little by little, the object was revealed.

Black hair started to twirl in the water as it floated to the top. It contrasted sharply to the pale, rotting flesh of a forehead, then deep hollow eye sockets, and finally, cold, blueish tinted lips that had been partially eaten away.

Stan stumbled back into the boat.

“What is it?” Bob yelled.

“It’s... it’s a dead body.”

“What?”

Bob looked over the edge to see the grisly face staring right at him. Fish were gathered all around, biting off little pieces of skin as it floated in the murky water.

Bob didn't say a word; he just kept looking at it while he held his hand over his mouth in disgust.

“What should we do?” Stan finally asked.

“Well, we should probably call the police.”

“Yeah, sounds like the right thing to do.”

Bob sighed. “Shame though, I was really looking forward to fishing today.”

Stan looked around. “Yeah, it sure was a perfect day.”

Bob looked at the dead body as it floated to the side of the boat, its head lightly bouncing off the metal.

“I mean, this fella is dead. We can't really help him any.”

Stan looked over. “Nope, deader than a door nail.”

There was long pause as Stan and Bob looked at each other.

“Well... what should we do?”

Bob looked out at the lake. The water was smooth and calm, the wind was light and refreshing, and the golden leaves on the trees were softly swaying back and forth. It really was the perfect day.

“Cut him loose... we've got some fishing to do.”

## GREMLINS

They're in your home now, like an unwanted guest.  
They live in your walls, like a nasty house pest.

They prefer the dark, and they despise the light.  
So keep the lamp on, and they'll stay out of sight.

When you go to sleep, that's when they come out to play.  
They'll mess with your stuff, to ruin the next day.

See they're tricksters at heart, they torment and tease.  
So they'll hide the remote, your shoes, and your keys.

If you can't find an item, it's them you should blame.  
They'll laugh as you search, as you play their game.

These gremlins, these goblins, just don't make them mad.  
If these creatures get angry, then things can get bad.

They'll forget about your wallet, your watch, or your phone.  
And they'll come for your flesh, your blood, and your bones.



## THE BIRD

James was enjoying the winding roads of County Road 613. It was the first week of October. The weather was still warm, the sky was crystal clear, and the leaves were showing just a hint of color. It was the perfect day for a drive.

James was going to visit his parents who lived in what many would call the “middle of nowhere.” There were cornfields for as far as the eye could see, and the closest neighbors were miles down the road. It didn’t bother James, though. He was coming from the city, and it was a welcome break from the noise, smog, and never-ending concrete.

He had about three hours of driving left before he arrived, but with the fresh air blowing through his open windows, he kind of wished it was longer.

But as he passed through a particularly sharp curve, his eyes locked in on something that didn’t quite fit the tranquil surroundings.

Blood stained the grass on the edge of the road, which was littered with chunks of flesh and fur. A large deer had been hit by a car, and its decomposing body was lying mangled near the pavement.

James had seen plenty of dead animals on the side of the road, but this one struck him differently for some reason, maybe it was how the body was contorted, maybe it was the smell; he didn’t know.

As he continued to gaze at what was left of the deer, a large black bird emerged from behind the carcass. It looked like a crow, or a raven, but it was much bigger—and much more intimidating.

It looked up at James as he passed by, then sank its beak into the deer's eye and started pulling, causing the deer's lifeless head to jerk violently.

Something about that visual was deeply unsettling to James. It made his stomach turn, and it kept playing back in his mind. It was a harsh reminder of how brutal nature could be.

Eventually his thoughts returned to more pleasant things as he continued driving. He was almost hypnotized by the road, so much so that he nearly didn't see the low fuel light blinking near the dash.

Luckily, a one stoplight town was just a couple miles ahead. As he pulled into the lone gas station, he got out of the car and took a long, deep breath of fresh air. It felt so much cleaner than the air he was used to breathing.

He stretched his arms and legs as he filled up the car, but as he stood there pumping gas, he saw a streak of black out of the corner of his eye.

He looked over and his stomach dropped.

It was the bird.

It was perched on top of the gas station sign, ruffling its feathers and squawking in James' direction. Its face and beak were still stained red from the deer blood.

“Did that thing follow me?” James mumbled to himself. Each time he looked in the bird's direction, he had flashbacks of the deer's head violently jerking as its eyeball was being ripped out. It made James shudder.

As soon as the tank was full, James hopped back in his car and sped off.



After about a half hour, James started to enjoy the drive again. It was getting to be late afternoon, and the sun was illuminating everything in a warm glow you only find in the country.

He soon passed a small farmhouse that had an old, dilapidated barn sitting next to it. The wood was rotted and cracked. It seemed as if one strong gust of wind would be enough to blow it over.

As James looked to the top of the barn, he gasped out loud. There was the bird, sitting on the edge of the roof, staring at James with its black eyes as he drove passed.

James immediately sped the car up. He wanted to get as far away from that thing as possible.

As he pressed down on the gas pedal, he weaved around a sharp turn, causing him to drift into the next lane.

He wasn't expecting another car to be there.

James ripped the wheel to the right, just barely missing a head on collision; the horn from the other car echoed through the quiet country air. But James couldn't keep control of the car. He went careening off the road and slammed into a large oak tree, knocking him unconscious.

When James finally woke up, the sun was just about to dip below the horizon. Blood was gushing from a wound on his forehead down into his eyes. He wiped it away to see his car wrapped around the tree, twisted metal and smoke everywhere.

He nudged the door open with his shoulder and collapsed to the ground. He could barely move. It felt like his back was broken.

He moaned in pain as he looked up to the sky, now a mixture of orange and yellow due to the sunset. Then a hint of black emerged in the middle of those colors. As it got closer, James knew exactly what it was: the bird.

It landed a few yards away and slowly crept up to his side. James screamed and yelled trying to scare it away, but it just twitched its head and crept closer.

The bird hopped onto his chest. Its talons digging into his skin as it inched closer to his face.

James knew what was going to happen next. He shifted his eyes toward the horizon. It was stunning, the most beautiful sunset he had ever witnessed. Then a loud, shrill squawk pierced the silence, and everything went black.

## DEAD DAD

“Shut up, Mom, you don’t know anything!”

Nathan’s mom clinched her jaw and her eyes got wide.

“What did you just say, young man?”

“I said, ‘shut up.’ Are you deaf?”

Nathan started walking towards the stairs. His mom stomped right after him.

“Where do you think you’re going? I’m not done talking to you.”

“I’m going to my room. Leave me alone.”

“I will NOT leave you alone. A police officer just dropped you off at the door for stealing a stupid t-shirt of all things. You’re grounded for a month, maybe two.”

“Whatever, Mom, like I care.”

“What is wrong with you? Why are you acting like this?

“I don’t know… I do what I want. Deal with it.”

Nathan’s Mom was nearly shaking. Her skin was red and her fists were clenched. Her blood was boiling with anger.

“I swear, Nathan, if your father were here, I’d have him whip you with a belt like my dad used to.”

Nathan smirked as he walked up the stairs. “Yeah, well, parents can’t do that anymore.”

“Your father would have been so disappointed.” Nathan’s mom covered her mouth and started sobbing. “You wouldn’t be acting like this if he were here.”

Guilt started to seep into Nathan’s stomach. He felt like he had a lump in his throat as he fought back every emotion except anger. He knew he was wrong, but ever since his dad died, he was filled with nothing but rage.

“Yeah, well, he’s not here. He’s dead.”

Nathan's mom continued to cry as he marched up to his room and slammed the door.

He flopped down on his bed and just stared at the ceiling, feeling sorry, feeling angry, and feeling tired.

About twenty minutes later, there was a knock at his bedroom door.

“Go away, Mom. I don’t want to talk to you.”

Three more knocks tapped at the door.

*Knock... knock... knock.*

“Mom! Did you hear me? I said I don’t want to talk to you!”

Then there was silence.

“Thank you. Leave me alone.”

*KNOCK... KNOCK... KNOCK*

The door vibrated and shook as it was pounded from the outside.

“Mom! You’re going to break the door! Stop!”

*BAM... BAM... BAM*

The door was being it with such force, the hinges started to give. The books and games Nathan had on his shelf crashed to the floor.

“Okay! Geez!”

Nathan got up from the bed and unlocked the door. When he opened it, he immediately fell to his knees.

His dad was standing in front of him—his skin rotting and pale. The features of his face were worn down to the bone, his lips and nose completely eaten away.

He was wearing the same thing he had been buried in: a dress shirt and tie, slacks, black shoes, and finally, a large leather belt that he was now holding in his maggot covered hand.



## THE CORNFIELD

“This is the best corn on the cobb I’ve ever tasted.”

Alice took another big bite, crunching into the juicy kernels.

The fruit and vegetables she got from the local farmer’s market were always better than the grocery store, so she went every Sunday to stock up for the week.

“What makes the corn red? I’ve never seen this before.”

The old man sitting by the vegetable stand adjusted the bill of his cap and looked up. “It’s a hybrid seed, a special type of sweet corn. I call it the Red Queen.”

He was a grizzled fellow, his skin leathery and dark from years in the sun.

“It’s delicious; I can’t get enough of it.”

Alice wasn’t alone, everyone at the market was raving about the “Red Queen” sweet corn.

“Any chance I can come by your farm and take a few pictures? I’m a photographer for the local newspaper.”

The old man took a deep breath and looked towards the ground, contemplating the decision. “Yeah that would be fine.”

He took out a crumpled old business card with directions and handed it to her. “Come on by tomorrow afternoon.”

Alice smiled. “Thanks! I’ll be there.”

...

The next day, Alice drove deep into the country. She immediately knew she was in the right place when she saw a vast, red cornfield sprawling across the horizon. She’d never seen anything like it in her life.



As she pulled up to the farmhouse, the grizzled old farmer walked outside and met her at the gravel drive.

“Hey there!” Alice beamed. “Thanks again for letting me come out here.”

The old man would barely look her in the eye. “Well, go on and get to it.”

Alice was a bit taken back by how inhospitable the man seemed. “Um... okay.”

Alice grabbed her camera gear and headed straight towards the ocean of deep red corn. The stalks were twice as tall as any normal corn stalks she’d seen.

*Snap... Snap... Snap*

Her camera clicked as she rattled off shot after shot.

The cornfield loomed above her, almost beckoning her to step inside. She continued forward, letting the sea of red surround her. With each step, the husks brushed against her skin, the sunlight scattering through the stalks towering above.

She lifted her camera for another shot, focusing in on a particularly bright ear of corn bursting out of its leafy encasement.

As the camera focused in, Alice noticed something odd. A red liquid was dripping from the husk. She reached her hand out and touched it, rubbing it between her fingers.

“Blood?” she whispered to herself.

She grabbed the ear of corn and ripped it open, more red liquid spurted all over her hands.

Alice inspected the corn closely, then her stomach turned and the air in her lungs seemed to evaporate.

There was a human tooth lodged inside.

“I’m so sorry. You must understand.”

Alice whipped around to see the old farmer standing just outside the field, his face solemn, his eyes welling up with tears.

“The Red Queen must eat. If she doesn’t, she will spread. I’m so sorry...”

Alice felt something wrap around her legs, her arms, and her neck. It was coarse and fibrous—the corn stalks.

She struggled and cried out for help, but it didn’t matter. She was pulled deeper and deeper into the field until the sound of her screams could no longer be heard.

## VOODOO

“What in the world could this be?” Jenna wondered.

A small package was sitting just outside the front door of her house. There was no address written on it, no postage, no markings whatsoever.

She lightly bit her lip, apprehensive at the thought of bringing a mystery package into her house. But that only lasted a few seconds, as her curiosity soon took over.

Was this an early birthday present? Maybe a surprise from one of her friends?

She picked the package up and brought it inside, shaking it a bit before placing it on the kitchen table. It wasn’t heavy and didn’t seem that fragile, maybe it was that magnetic desk ornament she had ordered months ago that never showed up.

As she tore away the brown paper covering, a small wooden box was revealed. It was fashioned into the shape of an old coffin, like something a vampire would sleep in.

“This is a bit creepy,” she mumbled to herself.

Jenna slowly cracked it open revealing a faded brown doll. It was crudely stitched together and had buttons for eyes. Even stranger, it had a little hat that oddly resembled one Jenna liked to wear.

“Okay, now it’s really creepy.”

She immediately picked up her phone and fired off a text message to her best friend.

“Very funny Julie, was the voodoo doll supposed to be an early Halloween prank or something?”

Julie responded almost immediately.

“Voodoo doll? What are you talking about? I didn’t send you anything.”



Jenna looked back at the doll with its stitched in smile lying on the table. Someone was playing a trick on her, she just had to figure out who.

She poured a glass of ice water and sat down to send more text messages. But with her eyes locked on her cell phone instead of the glass, she accidentally tipped it over, spilling cold liquid all over the place.

One of the ice cubes slid over to the right arm of the voodoo doll. As soon as it touched the fabric, an instant freezing sensation shocked Jenna's skin.

Jenna backed away from the table in disbelief.

*“That’s not possible...”*

Her lips were trembling as she watched the ice cube melt next to the doll.

She grabbed another ice cube from the freezer, her hand trembling from fear and the cold. She slowly walked up to the doll and touched its left arm with the ice, again a frigid chill burned on her skin.

Jenna stumbled backwards, catching herself on the kitchen counter. Her entire body was shaking with terror as her mind tried to comprehend what was happening.

She walked over to the doll and placed it inside the box it came in. She needed to put it somewhere safe until she figured out what to do.

As she walked out of the kitchen and turned the corner, she tripped on her dog, Zeus, a large German Shepherd who was lying in the family room.

Jenna crashed to the floor sending the box with the voodoo doll flying across the room. The box hit a bookshelf, snapping open the wooden lid and causing the doll to tumble down violently.

As soon as it hit the hardwood flooring a sharp pain erupted from Jenna's lower back, causing her to cry out in agony.

She got to her knees and took several deep breaths, then tried to crawl towards the doll. But when she looked up, she saw Zeus standing over it.

*"No! Zeus, please, come here! Leave the doll alone!"*

But Zeus didn't listen. He sniffed the doll a few times and wagged his tail.

It had been a long time since he got a new chew toy.

## THE BUTTERFLY EFFECT

You've caused someone's death; the probability is high.  
But it wasn't on purpose, you didn't know they would die.

It was likely a stranger, someone you've never even met.  
Maybe it was a John, a Bill, or a girl named Annette.

You didn't kill them with a knife, a gun, or a bat.  
You killed them with a choice, and it's as simple as that.

That choice was a link, in a long chain of events.  
Listen to this closely, or it won't make any sense.

One day you went left, instead of going right.  
And you stopped at yellow, instead of the red light.

A man was behind you, and your choice made him late.  
Little did you know, you had sealed his fate.

You turned off the road, and continued your day.  
The man went straight, heading his own way.

As he drove down the road, he looked over with dread.  
He was hit by a bus, and then he was dead.

Two seconds earlier, it would have stopped on a dime.  
But the bus never saw him, it was the wrong place, wrong time.

If it wasn't for you, the man wouldn't have wrecked.  
Because every choice matters, it's called the butterfly effect.





## THE LONELY HIGHWAY

Amanda was driving down Highway 67 in absolute silence. At 3 a.m. she was pretty much the only person on the road. The quiet of night calmed her, a small retreat from the hustle and bustle that occurred during the day.

As she passed a rest stop, a lone semi-truck pulled onto the highway. Amanda sighed, a bit disappointed she now had to share the road. She decided she would let it pass.

The semi switched lanes to move ahead, but it slowed down a bit once it was parallel to Amanda's car. It then slowed down even further, and re-entered the lane right behind her.

"What is this guy doing?" Amanda mumbled as she stared in the rear-view mirror.

Suddenly the semi's lights started flickering on and off. Then its horn blasted through the cool night air like a freight train.

Amanda's stomach started to knot as adrenaline pulsed through her veins. She pushed down on the gas to try and pull away, but the semi stayed right on her tail, the lights continued to flash, and the horn continued to shake her tiny little car. She couldn't get away.

If she didn't stop, the semi was going to run her off the road.

She slowed down and pulled over into the gravel. The semi did the same.

Amanda's heart was beating like a jackhammer. She opened the glove box and pulled out the first aid kit, she knew there was a knife in there.

She opened the car door and stepped out into the blinding headlights of the semi, holding the knife behind her back.

The semi driver opened his door and dropped down onto the pavement. It was an older man wearing a cowboy hat, blue jeans, and boots.

“Ma'am, I know I probably scared you to death, but you need to get away from that car right now.”

Amanda's breathing intensified, she apprehensively took a few steps toward the truck driver.

“Seriously, Ma'am, I'm not going to hurt you. Just come on over here, away from that car.”

Amanda took a few more steps and finally spoke up.

“What's wrong with my car?”

The truck driver raised his hands to show he didn't have a weapon or anything dangerous.

Amanda continued walking toward him and stopped about ten yards from where he was standing.

“Ma'am, I'm just gonna come right out and say it. There's a man in your backseat, it looked like he was covered in blood.”

Amanda stumbled back, her entire body started to tremble.

“*What?*”

The truck driver took a few steps forward, hands still raised.

“When I was about to pass you, I looked down and saw him behind the driver’s seat.”

Amanda looked back to her car. It was just sitting there, bathed in an ominous glow from the truck lights.

“Will you come look in the car for me?”

The truck driver nodded his head, and grabbed a revolver from the cab.

He slowly approached Amanda’s car, as she followed behind him.

He stopped along the side, crouched down and reached for the handle. He then ripped the door open and pointed his gun inside.

Indeed, there was a man in the back covered in blood. But he wasn’t alive.

“*This man is dead...*”

Suddenly the truck driver jolted forward violently as a sharp object plunged into his back again and again. His mind was so shocked the pain didn’t even register, then he briefly turned his head to look in the driver side mirror. Amanda was standing behind him holding a large, blood-soaked knife.

“I know, I’m the one who killed him.”

Soon the truck driver dropped to the pavement, lifeless.

Amanda looked around at the carnage of the scene. Two dead bodies, an old beat up car, and a semi-truck... she needed to leave immediately, but where would she go?

“Indiana might be nice,” she thought. “Maybe I’ll go there.”

## **DO NOT READ THIS**

**DO NOT READ THIS!**

Seriously, stop reading right now. Skip this story...

I said STOP. Why are you continuing to read?

Do you not understand what “stop reading” means?

STOP! Something bad is going to happen if you keep going!

**IF YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE, STOP READING!**

...

**DO NOT KEEP READING**

...

This is my last warning. If you keep going, I can't help you.

Please, I'm begging you, don't let the cycle continue.

This is the end of the page... your final chance. **STOP NOW!**



If you're reading this, it's too late. You've seen it, and it has seen you... it never forgets a face.

We don't know how it got inside the book. The illustration just randomly showed up in the first print, and we definitely didn't put it there. It seems to be some type of spirit, or demon, we're not exactly sure.

**All we know is that once you've seen it, you have 24 hours to show its face to someone else... or it will come for you.**

It might show up the second after the 24-hour period has passed, or it might wait months, even years, before it decides you're next. It loves to create fear and anxiety, to have you looking over your shoulder waiting for it to finally arrive.

Again, if you're reading this, you have two options. You can either stop the cycle and accept your fate, or you can show the illustration to someone else within 24 hours. This works digitally as well, so whether it's right or wrong, many have decided to share the image on social media.

We're trying to track this activity as best we can, like a virus that's rapidly spreading. So if you decide to go that route, you can help us by tagging your post with [#thebookdemon](#) or something similar.

If you show someone else the image, please make sure they know the rules. It will save their life.

We're so sorry this happened (but we did warn you beforehand). We're doing everything we can to stop this thing.

But until we do... you have 24 hours.

## TOE-EATERS

Termites, cockroaches, ants, mice... none of them are as bad as *toe-eaters*.

Nobody knows where they originated from, but they're almost impossible to get rid of. In fact, one man was so frustrated with his toe-eater infestation, that he burned his entire house down to try and kill them. It still didn't work.

They're nocturnal creatures that live underground, only coming out when it's time to feed. But if they make their way into your house, they become much more active, living inside the walls, crawl spaces, and other dark, cool places.

The first thing you'll notice if you have a toe-eater infestation is all the other house pests will suddenly disappear. The reason is simple, the toe-eaters eat them... they eat almost anything. But their favorite food of all is 100% cotton, tinged with the scent of feet. For this reason, old socks are like a delicacy to them. Ever have an old sock go missing, even though you looked absolutely *everywhere*? A toe-eater is most likely to blame. And just like most pests, if there's one, that means there are many, many more.

As far as appearance goes, they're nasty little monsters. They're about the size and shape of a golf ball, except covered in dark brown fur. Their eyes are almost non-existent, but they have a large mouth filled with needle-like teeth. They're like a nightmarish mix between a small rat and Pac-man.

Most of the time, they move using four spider-like legs, but if they're threatened or need to move quickly, they ball themselves up and roll away at a surprising speed. If you've ever seen one, you probably just thought it was a mouse scurrying away.



As mentioned before, if you find yourself with a toe-eater infestation, there's not much you can do other than move out of the house. But if you decide to stay, there's an important piece of advice you should follow no matter what.

They're called "toe-eaters" for a reason... so don't ever...*ever*... fall asleep with your foot off the bed.

## HIDE AND SEEK

“Ready or not, here I come!” Marci uncovered her eyes and started creeping down the stairs.

Whenever she babysat little Jessica, she knew the evening would involve a few games of hide and seek. And for a 5-year-old, Jessica was pretty good at it.

Marci tip-toed into the family room. She looked behind the TV and under the coffee table. No Jessica.

She moved to the kitchen and looked inside the large bottom cabinets, one by one. Again, no Jessica.

Marci walked to the master bedroom. She looked under the bed, in the closet, in the adjoining bathroom shower. Still, no Jessica.

She went through every room on the first floor, and every spot she could think of, but Jessica remained hidden.

“Okay Jessica, I give up. Come on out now.”

A tiny little voice peeped up from the adjacent room.

“You’re so close! I’m in here.”

Marci walked over to the room and searched all around.

“Jessica, you win. I can’t find you.”

Jessica’s voice again shouted out, only this time from the hallway near the garage entrance. Marci walked over there, it was nothing but empty space.

“Seriously, Jessica, come out right now or I’m going to tell your mom.”

The voice was back in the family room. It seemed to come from behind the sofa, “Aw, don’t be a tattletale. That’s not very nice.”



Marci stomped toward the sound and pulled the love seat back, again Jessica was nowhere to be found, and Marci was getting agitated.

“Jessica, you have until the count of three to tell me where you are, or you are going to bed immediately.”

The voice shouted from near the basement door on the other side of the house.

“But it’s only 8 o’clock!”

Marci folded her arms, “Exactly my point.”

“Okay fine! I’m down in the basement.”

Marci rolled her eyes, “That’s cheating. You know the rules. First floor of the house only.”

Marci walked to the basement door and opened it, the stairs seemed to fade into a pitch-black void that dissipated as soon as she flipped the light switch on.

“Jessica, are you trying to scare me or something?”

“No, I need you to come down here though, I think I hurt myself running in the dark.”

Marci sighed and shook her head, then descended down the wooden steps one by one.

“See, that’s what you get when you break the ru—”

Jessica wasn’t in the basement.

“Marci, what are you doing down there?”

Marci looked up to see Jessica standing at the top of the stairs.

“But you just said you were down here?”

Jessica crinkled her little brow, “Why would I be down there, that’s against the rules. I was under all the towels in the laundry room.”

Marci’s stomach dropped as goosebumps exploded across her skin.

“*Then who was I talking to?*”

Suddenly the lights cut off and the basement door slammed shut.

Marci was in absolute darkness.

She could feel the warmth of something breathing on the back of her neck. And when it finally spoke, it still mimicked the sound of Jessica's voice.

*"You were talking to me. I'm right behind you."*

## BEDTIME

Check the garage.  
Check the door locks.  
Check the window locks.  
Check the shower.  
Check behind the bookshelf.  
Check the coat closet.  
Check behind the couch.  
Check behind the TV stand.  
Check under the bed.  
Check the bedroom closet.

Adam was meticulous when it came to his bedtime checklist. Every single night it was the same thing. If he didn't go through the list, he never felt safe enough to fall asleep.

Some would say Adam had Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, or "OCD." Others thought he simply watched too many horror movies.

Nonetheless, every night the list had to be checked.

Check the garage.  
Check the door locks.  
Check the window locks.  
Check the shower.  
Check behind the bookshelf.  
Check the coat closet.  
Check behind the couch.  
Check behind the TV stand.  
Check under the bed.  
Check the bedroom closet.

One night, Adam got home particularly late. His eyelids were so heavy he could barely stand. He wanted nothing more than the warmth and comfort of his king-sized bed... to crawl under the sheets and fade into a blissful dreamland.

For the first time in years, he thought about skipping the checklist. But he knew deep down he could never do that. He slowly trudged to the garage door and started the process.

Check the garage.

Check the door locks.

Check the window locks.

Check the shower.

Check behind the bookshelf.

Check the coat closet.

Check behind the couch.

Check behind the TV stand.

Check the bedroom closet.

As soon as he was done, Adam flopped onto his puffy comforter. He threw the covers over himself and laid his head on a cool, perfectly fluffed pillow.

He smiled as he closed his eyes. Nothing could match the satisfaction of that moment.

But just as he was about to drift off, a grizzled, deep voice pierced the silence.

*“You forgot to check under the bed.”*





# NIGHTMARE SOUP

## II

THE SECOND HELPING





